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Arms Sales and the Senate

A Senate majority has struck a timely blow at the shadowy procedure under which the Defense Department has guaranteed loans from Export-Import Bank funds for arms sales to underdeveloped countries. Other voting tests loom on this issue, but it is an encouraging start that 46 Senators backed the Foreign Relations Committee's effort to curb the Pentagon arms salesmen.

In doing so they wisely ignored the ill-supported assertion that they would prevent the President from furnishing military aid to countries where such action would be vital to American interests. Warnings along this line from Gen. Earle G. Wheeler for the Joint Chiefs of Staff failed to stampede them. Plainly, the Senators found little persuasiveness in his claim that curtailment of arms aid and sales could "weaken the free world's collective defensive position" and invite Communist aggression.

It was understandable that General Wheeler, if asked, should argue against cuts in American military aid. But it is obvious that many Senators felt he had gone overboard in defending the little-known system under which the Pentagon over the last two fiscal years has guaranteed \$604 million in so-called "country X" loans to fourteen underdeveloped countries. To the extent that there is justification for diverting the slender resources of these countries to arms purchases, a sounder method can be devised under much more adequate control.

General Wheeler's statement was the latest in a series of occasions in which the Johnson Administration has used the military to push policies that are mostly—and rightly—political. It is that tendency that has aroused Senator Stephen M. Young to condemn what he calls the assumption by the military of "an increasingly larger role in formulating national policy."

The Ohio Senator was aroused not by General Wheeler but by television programs in which Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp advocated accelerated bombing of North Vietnam and Gen. Harold K. Johnson forecast "honest" elections in South Vietnam next month.

Senator Young has things turned around, of course. What is most alarming about the Vietnam conflict—and has been for a long time—is the extent to which decisions that should be primarily determined by the civilian branches of government are made in fact by the military. What is frightening is not that admirals and generals go on television to give their opinions on matters which should be reserved for political decision but that the Administration encourages them to do so.

The most flagrant example was the Administration's use last April of Gen. William C. Westmoreland for an unprecedented sales talk to Congress in support of a Vietnam step-up. As Senator George McGovern said in criticizing that affair, the blame rested not with the general "because he is obviously doing exactly what he is told to do by his Commander-in-Chief." So are Admiral Sharp and General Wheeler, and that is really the most worrisome aspect of the situation.

The Senate fired a warning shot in its vote on arms aid and sales. It was a vote for restoring the constitutional balance of civilian and military authority.